

Idaho Republicans are still battling in Boise

Jim Fisher
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You might think a long legislative session marked by disharmony among members of the same majority party would leave Idaho Republicans ready for a break from squabbling. But such a thought would underestimate the tenacity of the party's right wing.

Monday, unhealed wounds were on display again as an Ada County magistrate sentenced Elmore County's Republican vice chairman for making a pest of himself in state offices, particularly the office of Gov. Butch Otter. Although the judge gave Christopher Pentico the lightest possible sentence for trespassing, 30 days of probation with a cleared record once they are completed, Pentico's supporters marched directly from the courthouse to Otter's office.

"Idahoans for Liberty," including organizers of recent Tea Party demonstrations and supporters of former presidential candidate Ron Paul, wanted Otter to pardon Pentico and stop enforcing the state trespass law against him.

There might be a question of the propriety of applying a law aimed at protecting private property to buildings owned by the public, but there is apparently little question Pentico, 42, has been a nuisance, and not just in Otter's office. Still smoldering over a five-year-old dispute with Boise State University officials, he has also taken his complaint to Attorney General Lawrence Wasden, state school Superintendent Tom Luna, dozens of legislators and staff members of Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch.

"He seems to think that if he comes 12 times, the answer will be different than the 11th time," Otter spokesman Jon Hanian said Monday.

Earlier, Otter himself defended his instruction to Idaho State Police officers to prevent Pentico from again entering the governor's office. It was Pentico's refusal to stay away that got him arrested April 2.

"If he's disruptive to the staff - to the demeanor of the office - we have to remove him," Otter said.

The governor would probably find little disagreement from Democrats on that, but Otter's fellow Republicans are another matter. Last month, a majority of members of the Ada County Republican Central Committee forced a vote on a resolution charging Otter with violating Pentico's rights, but failed to get the needed two-thirds margin for passage.

In addition, nine legislators signed a letter saying Pentico had acted responsibly and respectfully, and another, Rep. Pete Nielsen, R-Mountain Home, testified in his behalf in court.

Yes, these are representatives of the faction that unseated GOP State Chairman Kirk Sullivan last June, and is continuing to work for closing party primary elections to all who won't register publicly as Republicans.

Remember when Republicans accused Democrats of having no unifying message, serving instead as an aggregation of discrete interest groups? At least no one claimed those interest groups were at each others' throats.

Today's Idaho Republicans are another matter. There appears no way to reconcile those who want to serve in government and those who want to disown it. - J.F.